

# Revelation in Christianity and Islam

**Mahmoud Ayoub**

For religions with both a belief and ritualistic system, the concept of revelation is foundational. Revelation takes place through dreams, apparitions, direct or indirect communication, or divine manifestation through prayers or meditation. In the monotheistic religions of the Middle East, revelation comes to a prophet, soothsayer or seer, or a priest or saintly friend (*walī*) of God.

Christian revelation is unique in that it combines divine communication through the Holy Spirit, and divine manifestation or self disclosure through the incarnation of the Divine Word (*logos*). Because revelation in Islam is continuous with ancient Semitic pre-Biblical and Biblical concepts, a word must be said about some of these ancient views of revelation.

Prevalent in all the major religions of Mesopotamia is the idea of a divine or heavenly book. This may be the Book of Life, for example, or the Book of Destiny. Another form is primordial myths, such as the Epic of Atra-Hasis of ancient Sumer, or the Epics of Gilgamesh and Enuma Elish of Babylon. Still other forms are dreams and divination, auguries and omens. What concerns us here, however, is revelation as divine communication of heavenly books or tablets.

The Hebrew Bible is a library of revealed books spanning a period of at least a thousand years. The Torah (the first five books of the Bible) presents at least two forms of revelation: divine direct communication to Adam, Noah, and Abraham, and divine dictation to Moses of the Torah. It is also believed

that the tablets were not dictated, but written by God. In this regard, reference should be made to the ancient/Islamic concept of a primordial heavenly pen, which moves and records on a special heavenly tablet the destinies of human beings from the beginning to the end of the world.

Revelation in the Bible often comes through prophetic utterances on behalf of God. This form of divine communication appears either in an oracular form or through prophetic announcements of God's decisions and manifestations of His pleasure or anger with the covenanted people of Israel. Such commands or utterances are prefaced with the phrase, 'thus saith the Lord'.

Still another form of Biblical revelation is apocalyptic visions, a late, and largely post-Biblical form of divine communication. Apocalyptic revelations are eschatological in nature and purpose. Here the phrase, 'thus saith the Lord' is replaced with the dramatic announcement, 'behold and I saw.' The books of Ezekiel and Daniel of the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation in the New Testament represent this form of revelation in the Bible.

The writing and redaction of the books that came to constitute the New Testament took at least two centuries. This is of course a much shorter period than that of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, but is still considerable when compared with the period of revelation and redaction of the *Qur'ān*. Furthermore, the four canonical Gospels were chosen from a plethora of 'synoptic Type' and Gnostic gospels, while the

*Qur'ān* is associated with one man, the Prophet Muhammad, and was revealed to him alone. These books were believed by Christians until the Reformation not to have been revealed, but to have been inspired by the Holy Spirit. Thus, strictly speaking, they are not 'the Word of God', but the inspired words of their authors. The Bible's epithet 'Word of God' comes from Luther's emphasis on the Bible alone (*sola scriptura*) and the general re-discovery by the Reformed Churches of the Bible as an alternative moral, social, spiritual, and even political, source of authority to that of the Catholic Church.

Revelation in Christianity is not divine communication, or what the *Qur'ān* calls *wahī*, but divine disclosure or manifestation in and through Christ. Hence, the Gospels are not in reality 'revelation', but the history of the 'self-revelation of God through Christ'. Can Christians, then, really be considered 'people of the Book' (*ahl al-kitāb*), as the *Qur'ān* and Islamic tradition have insisted?

I believe that there is room for meaningful dialogue between our two faith-communities. For this to be achieved, however, we must look at revelation in our two traditions on their own terms. Only then will we be able to examine meaningfully and constructively what appears to be two diametrically opposed views of revelation.

**Prof Mahmoud Ayoub** is Co-Director of the Duncan Black Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian/Muslim Relations, Hartford Seminary.

## A Muslim Perspective on Divine Incarnation and Divine Communication